

MAY 12 2016

Board of Supervisors
San Luis Obispo County

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To:
SLO County Board of Supervisors
San Luis Obispo, CA 93408

From:
Cal Poly Science, Technology, and Society Minors Program
San Luis Obispo, CA 93401

May 9, 2016

*This letter is intended for the May 24th hearing on Sustainable Groundwater Management Act next steps. We request that this letter be included in the agenda packet for May 24th.

Student Proposal for Paso Robles Groundwater Basin Management

Dear Frank Mecham, Bruce Gibson, Adam Hill, Lynn Compton, and Debbie Arnold:

We are concerned Cal Poly students and San Luis Obispo County residents that have come together to study climate change and resiliency, mainly as they relate to water resources and drought in California. As part of our Project-Based Learning in Science, Technology and Society coursework, we have spent five weeks researching the conditions, management, and stakeholders of our county's groundwater basins. Our group chose this topic of study due to the immense environmental, economic, and social impacts of groundwater sustainability. Additionally, one of our group members, Chris Apple, has lived in Templeton his entire life and is concerned about the quality of life for current and future residents in relation with groundwater. Fun fact - Chris was one of Debbie Arnold's preschool students. Through coursework, outside research, community interviews, and consultation with a Water Resources Advisory Committee (WRAC) member, we have developed this proposal for sustainable groundwater basin management, as called for by the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act.

Before describing our proposal, we'd like to thank the Board of Supervisors for making groundwater management a political priority. Since our dwindling groundwater resources are invisible by nature, we understand how easy it would be to disregard this as a pressing issue. The fact that our community leaders and residents have been in active discussion about this for some time is a huge step toward arriving at sustainable and long term solutions.

Why Do We Care?

Groundwater is one of the most important sources of freshwater in this county. The agricultural, industrial, and residential sectors all rely on groundwater in some capacity. The health of groundwater systems is an important indicator of community environmental, economic, and social well being. On a personal level, we care deeply about this issue because it has huge potential consequences for our friends, neighbors, and future generations if a solution is not reached quickly. The ongoing drought and industrial stakeholders have severely depleted groundwater resources, and this is just the beginning. Global climate change trends have contributed to drastic and unpredictable fluctuations in local weather patterns. For these reasons, it is extremely important to

establish groundwater management solutions that will allow long-term access to water for every person in need.

Our Recommendation

We recommend that the County Board of Supervisors support groups that are already becoming active in managing the high-priority Paso Robles groundwater basin to achieve sustainable basin management. This recommendation includes the exploration of creating a joint powers authority with representation of all basin overlayers including those overlying the Atascadero subbasin and the Monterey County portion of the basin to coordinate multiple Groundwater Sustainability Agencies (GSAs) and Groundwater Sustainability Plans (GSPs).

Discussion

Within the county and region, we have many agencies, services districts, nonprofit organizations, and dedicated individuals who can take responsibility for the unsustainable use of the Paso Robles groundwater basin by creating and implementing their own GSPs and GSAs. By encouraging local agencies to develop and implement their own GSA and GSP, the county would be investing in climate change resilience capacity. The American Geophysical Union stated that tree-ring data shows the 2012 - 2014 drought was the most severe California drought in the past 1,200 years. Climate change is altering the frequency and severity of storms and droughts, and similar "megadroughts" are likely in the years to come.¹ Empowering local agencies to tackle the groundwater issues would directly build the County's resilience capacity - both in the sense that localized management would build capacity to address future groundwater related issues and county residents and agencies would become more involved in and accountable for climate change resiliency capacity building.

The County should continue to educate the Paso Robles basin stakeholders on the value of local management and encourage the formation of local GSAs. The Paso Robles basin is very extensive in size and includes the Atascadero subbasin and part of the basin in Monterey County. Due to this, we are recommending the establishment of multiple GSAs, and the exploration of creating a joint powers authority to coordinate the GSAs and GSPs.

The County Board of Supervisors should not encourage the State to manage our groundwater resources. To utilize and develop our community's specific needs and resources, local groundwater stakeholders should be further encouraged to take responsibility for management.

We acknowledge that by managing the basin through multiple GSAs and GSPs, fairness in funding is a complex issue. Our group recommends that the county work to provide local agencies with a planning and implementation subsidy through grants. In addition, we recommend that other necessary funds come from the local municipalities, businesses, and residents who use groundwater from the basin. Due to the complexity of funding the management of commons, such as groundwater, we are only making this brief funding recommendation, but we emphasize that funding be balanced between all stakeholders - county, city, business, and individual - to improve accountability at all levels.

We are very aware that rural Paso Robles basin overlayers already voted against the tax for and implementation of a local GSA. During our investigation of the Paso Robles vote, we talked with local

¹ Griffin, D., & Anchukaitis, K. J. (2014). *How unusual is the 2012–2014 California drought?* Geophysical Research Letters.

water resources planners, hydrologists, concerned community members, and a WRAC member to understand why stakeholders opposed the proposal. Through our research, it seems there were two main voter ideologies, which caused the significant disapproving vote results. One major group of basin overlayers believe they are entitled to the water under their property and do not want any agency monitoring their water use and telling them how much they can and cannot use. The second major group of overlayers view groundwater as a commons that should be locally managed, but they fear being taken advantage of by large groundwater-using entities such as the local wine and tourism industries. Almost all individuals we spoke with believe that allowing basin stakeholders to develop their own strategies for funding and management of the basin would produce much more favorable strategies than the proposal provided to basin stakeholders for the recent vote. Part of our recommendation is that the County empower Paso Robles basin stakeholders to discuss, debate, and create their own GSPs in a way where all groups are heard, considered, and compromised with.

One distinct challenge is the unique nature of sustainable groundwater management - we cannot look to the experience of basins ahead of us in the process where the State has already stepped in under SGMA provisions. There is no past State management experience to inform the question of "what would happen if the State steps in?". Informed by other examples of State management of local issues, it is likely that the State would establish a medium for demand management to ensure sustainable funding and management. Our group and many stakeholders we engaged on this topic believe that local management would promote environmental, economic, and social quality of life much more than the pay-as-you-pump regulation the State would likely enact.

As the SLO County Board of Supervisors "is committed to the implementation of such policies and the provision of such services that will enhance the economic, environmental and social quality of life in San Luis Obispo County,"² we hope you will adopt these recommendations.

Sincerely,


Brendan Abrams, Chris Apple, Denise Garcia, Bridget Garlinghouse

² San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors website (slocounty.ca.gov)